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## CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS

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The first thing to be kept in mind concerning the Negro church is that it is the only institution which the Negro may call his own. If he is a teacher he must be examined by the white school board, teach in a building owned by the white county officials, and receive his salary from the white superintendent. The same is true of the colored lawyer or doctor; he must receive from the white authorities his license to practice law or medicine, and this is granted under conditions formulated entirely independently of the Negro. But with the church it is altogether different. So long as the Negro conforms to the general laws of the state he is absolutely free to direct his church affairs as he sees fit. Error may be taught, immorality may thrive, and funds be misappropriated, all without feeling the pressure of any outside authority. A new church may be built, a new pastor installed, new members received and all the machinery of the church set in motion without ever consulting any white person. In a word, the church is the Negro's own institution, developed according to his own standards, and more nearly than anything else represents the real life of the race.

Another primary factor is the Negro's religious temperament. He has the simplicity of a child in the presence of the unseen forces of life, and readily yields to the demands of reverence and worship. Whatever is mysterious appeals to his uncultivated mind. In all matters concerning death and the future life his attitude is one of dread and gloom. His feelings are easily aroused, not so much by sight or thought as by sound. Whatever is weird or sad awakens an instinctive response in the bosom of the colored man. All of his songs and most of his preaching illustrate this primary fact; and the preacher who would teach his people must clothe his message in picturesque forms and deliver it in that peculiar sing-song voice so irresistible to the average Negro. Many times I have heard the better type of preacher trying to impress some message

upon his people with no response whatever until he abandoned the formal presentation and took up the weird swinging rhythm so dear to the hearts of his hearers. The effect is always instantaneous. It is like the words of an old song to a man far from home. The first note is sufficient to stir the inmost springs of his emotional life. It is this appeal to the emotions which makes the church and the religious ceremony so dear to the heart of the Negro. The church is the one place where he can pour out his heart and revel in the unchecked flow of feeling and sentiment.

The Negro is often criticised for this emotionalism, and the colored preacher blamed for appealing to it in his sermons, but it is very doubtful whether the race is at present prepared for anything else. In the best educated circles, of course, there are many who can enjoy an intellectual sermon; but congregations in which the educated class predominates are very scarce, and even in the large cities today the preacher who appeals to the emotions will soon win over to his church many of the members of his more scholarly brother in the next block. Few things in the colored ministry today are more pathetic than the struggle of a conscientious pastor trying to protect his people and prevent them from running off after some sensational preacher who has just come to town. This situation prevails wherever the Negro lives today, and in more than one large church in Philadelphia is a very pressing problem. Unless a colored preacher has some strong institutional organization or a very powerful personal attraction he is almost compelled to yield to this elemental demand of his race. He must first of all make them "feel good," and if in doing so he can impress some valuable truth he is fortunate.

The power of the emotional appeal has only been strengthened by the traditional training of the race. Through his whole history the Negro has been taught to fear the powers of the spirit world, the unseen forces have been held up to him as directing and controlling all his life, and from the days of the African fetich doctor until now the tendency of his religious teaching has been to keep alive the feeling of dependence upon the divine powers. His lot whether in Africa or in America has never been easy and his daily needs have driven him to look to some other source for comfort and help. The need of heaven as the place for the righting of all wrongs and the enjoyment of all things denied him here has been

ever present, and the church as the medium of attainment for all these desires has had a tremendous power over the life of the race.

Before the Civil War nearly all Negroes were members of the white church, and from their place in the rear or in the balcony listened to the same preaching as the whites. But with emancipation everything was changed rapidly. Separate colored churches sprang up everywhere, and the colored members rapidly withdrew from the white churches to join those of their own color.

In organization and administration these colored churches followed closely the forms of the white churches from which they sprang and which were their only models. As a rule the Catholics and Episcopalians have retained their colored members as regular members of the white churches. The Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Northern Methodists have allowed them to form separate churches under control of the whites. The colored Baptists, however, and most of the colored Methodists have formed churches entirely independent of white control, a fact which largely accounts for the large numbers in these denominations.

The people as a rule love the freedom of their own institutions, and the colored preacher has not cared or has not been able to conform to the more strict requirement of a church controlled by the whites when the doors of his own independent church are open to him without any specific training or ability on his part. There are of course in the Methodist and Baptist church many educated preachers, and the number is increasing, but there can be no doubt that as a rule the better trained men are in the other denominations. In the colored Presbyterian or Congregational church today one will usually find a well-trained preacher, conducting an orderly service very much after the fashion of the white church, but almost invariably with a small congregation. If one would see the typical Negro congregation he must go to the Baptist or Methodist church perhaps on the same block. Here he will probably find a preacher with mediocre ability and training, following the traditional lines of preaching, but with a house full of people from all classes of life. As a distinct institution, therefore, there can be no doubt that the Baptist or Methodist is the typical Negro church.

At the beginning of the war the total number of colored church members was perhaps 700,000, of which the Baptists claimed 350,000 and the Methodists 270,000, most of whom were still in the white

churches. Today the colored Baptists have their own local associations, state conventions, and the national convention formed as early as 1886. They report for last year 17,000 churches, 12,000 ministers, and 2,000,000 communicants. The colored Methodists have had a similar growth, and today the five separate branches report a membership of about 1,500,000.

This complete separation opens up to the ambitious preacher an opportunity not found in the churches under white control. It has the advantage of developing initiative on the part of both pastor and people and trains them in the habits of self-control as nothing else in the reach of the race. But it has also been attended with certain definite evils. The freedom from white supervision has at times encouraged excesses which are harmful to all. The Negro, like most of us, loves the spoils of office, and the titles of the ministry have a peculiar fascination for him. To be called "reverend" is the joy of his life; he will do almost anything to secure the title of "D.D.," and if by any means he may become "president" of some Baptist body or "elder" or "bishop" in the Methodist church, the dream of his life has been realized. In this he differs very little from some of his white brethren, but the possibility of securing these honors has been a peculiar temptation to him. He has often prostituted religion to personal ambition, and the highest offices have been too often bestowed upon men of unworthy character who were able by political astuteness to control a majority. To verify this one has only to have a confidential talk with almost any colored preacher following some important church election. The evil is a definite one and is to be remedied not by taking from them the privilege of conducting their own affairs but by raising the standard of character throughout the rank and file of the race.

The Negro church can hardly be said to have a theology. The teachings of the colored pulpit are the traditional doctrines of the white church handed down through white teachers and fostered by current commentaries available for the colored preacher. The care of God for the needy, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, the verbal inspiration of the Bible are the main lines of theological thought. These things the average preacher accepts without making any effort to establish their truth or falsity. What the average negro wants is not to test the truth of a proposition but to preach an "effective" sermon. He is willing enough to accept what others

have said as true so long as he can use it effectively. I have talked with many of the best trained preachers of the colored church and I have yet to find one who in any way is bothering himself with the current problems of theology. One of these men told me that it would do no good to keep up with current questions as his people were not interested in them and could not profit by their discussion. What pleases the average congregation is the recital of the Bible stories, and the preacher usually conforms to this demand.

Then too the various questions which divide the white congregations have very little real meaning for the Negro. He joins the Methodist or Baptist church almost indiscriminately as one is nearer home, has a better building or a better preacher, or is made up of his associates. There is loyalty to one's denomination but it is not theological. The average Negro preacher never preaches a strictly denominational sermon and cares very little what his people believe so long as they become members of his church. All love the spectacular elements in the communion and the "baptizin," but care very little for what lies back of them. Only recently I saw a Baptist preacher conducting a Methodist protracted meeting in a Methodist church. The Methodist could not come; the Baptist was a good preacher; so why not use him? The Methodists saw no objection and supported him loyally.

In church administration the Negro is more original and often very effective. His primary problem is one of finances. The preacher may not care what his people believe; he may not even care what they do: but he must be vitally interested in the finances of the church. In this particular direction the Negro has been unusually active. New churches are constantly springing up and in most places they compare very favorably with the average white church. The old rude structures are giving way for the modern frame or brick building, nicely painted, furnished with modern pews, often with pipe organ and all that goes to make up a well ordered church equipment. Quite naturally therefore the problem of the church debt has come to be a standing burden for the colored pastor as is often the case with his white brother.

In addition to his church building the Negro is today spending quite a sum of money in purely altruistic endeavor. Hospitals and rescue homes are increasing; denominational schools receive most of their funds from the churches, and almost every colored denomination supports one or more foreign missionaries in the West Indies

and in various parts of Africa. These activities mark out the lines along which the church is working and are a distinctly hopeful sign, but they entail heavy expense upon a people poorly equipped to bear them. When these items are added to the regular church expenses and preacher's salary, the financial problem assumes very great importance and taxes the ingenuity of the most efficient pastor.

The first thing of course which the pastor must do to meet the demand is to get the crowds. To do this he must be able to make them "enjoy" the service by preaching sensational sermons. Nothing else is so effective in bringing the crowds, and in a way this is the most important factor in the pastor's work.

Furthermore he must not be too strict in discipline. Many of his best paying members belong to the questionable class and are known to be earning money in ways not approved by the teachings of the church. These he can not afford to alienate; it would ruin his church. And many a preacher has been forced to accommodate his teaching and administration to such persons when, if he had been free, his work would have borne a different stamp. On the other hand there are many according to the statements of some of their best men, who deliberately take advantage of this situation to bring into their churches a crowd of people who are willing to pay liberally to be let alone in their personal lives and who at the same time are willing to let the preacher alone in his own shortcomings. Just how far this is true no one can tell, but there can be no doubt that some of the pastors of the largest churches maintain their places because they have around them church officials who support the pastor in the toleration of moral laxness on the part of both pastor and people. They feel repaid by the fact that, by having a big church which contributes liberally, the pastor gets a prominent place in the denomination and the glory is reflected back upon his members. Perhaps there are very few pastors who do not feel the pressure of this condition, but while many are striving nobly against it many others seem to welcome it for the sake of their own ambitions. It is a place where the need of money and the love of power have become dominant.

The next great problem of the colored preacher is to meet the religious needs of his people. This would seem to be first, but one who has watched the work of the colored church is compelled to conclude that the question of finance comes first so far as any defi-

nite plans are followed. But the conscientious preacher finds among his people much need for the more personal activity of the minister and often his work in this particular is very effective. The Negro works all the week under discouraging conditions, reminded on every hand of his inferiority, ashamed of his racial history, and suffering for many things of which he is innocent. Too often ignorance and vice crowd out of his life what little of light might otherwise enter. So on Sunday the preacher faces his people knowing that most of them need encouragement and a glimpse of something better than they have known through the week. It is not surprising therefore that much of the preaching takes this form with the definite purpose of enabling the congregation to forget their grievances and, for a short while at least, to feel that there is some one who does care for them and who does not blame them for being black. This Sunday religion of the race is valuable if for no other reason than that it encourages and satisfies as nothing else does or can the often unexpressed hopes of the race. In the hands of an unscrupulous preacher, of course, the gospel of comfort degenerates into a disgusting effort to "stir up" the people. But on the part of their best men it brings to lives accustomed to harshness and injustice a glimpse at least of tenderness and love. In so far the Sunday preaching of the average Negro church is valuable. But when it comes to the actual religious instruction given and the motive power for better living it is very difficult to speak encouragingly or accurately. We so readily generalize concerning the Negro's life and know in reality so little about it. His actual religious life is bound up with all his activities and is exceedingly difficult to analyze. A few things however are evident.

Among a large number of older people both white and black there is the definite conviction that the present generation of Negroes is hopelessly degenerate, as compared with the devout life of the slave. One of the most common notes in present day preaching is that the younger set of Negroes can not be trusted, and that their religion is worthless. It used to be possible, say the older ones, to trust a member of the church, but now there is no difference. Church members and non-church members are doing the same thing—trying to get the advantage of the other fellow.

Part of this distrust is due to the well-known tendency to glorify the good old days of the slave. But part of it is well founded.

The younger Negro, faced with the sudden readjustment coming with emancipation, has not yet been able to find a secure moral or religious footing. He is engaged in a long, hard, struggle, in which he started with poor equipment. He has been asked to make the change from irresponsibility to responsibility, adopt a new standard of ethics and make it effective in his life, when his traditions and inclinations make that well-nigh impossible. If many of the first few generations fail one need not be surprised. We can only hope that the condition is temporary and that a new and educated generation will find religion and morals more vitally related in every day life.

On the other hand the church itself is largely responsible for much of the shortcomings of the younger set. All sorts of pressure is brought to bear in getting them into the church, very little test of fitness is applied, and the young member comes in feeling that if he has been "sorry" for his misdeeds, and will keep up his church dues, he is all right. There can be no doubt that church rivalry for numbers lies at the basis of much of this laxness, and if the younger set come in and remain without shaping their lives to the higher standard of religious duty, the blame is certainly not all with them. They are surrounded with evidences of laxity in the moral conceptions of the others and it is little wonder if they fail.

Then too there are many things now to detract from the interest in church life. The secret order bids for a large amount of the man's time, new avenues of entertainment are constantly opening, and with the growing distrust of the motives of the ministry which places such persistent emphasis upon money, tend inevitably to weaken the hold of religion upon the life of the race. So that one feels disposed to agree that in many cases the judgment is correct—the religion of the average young Negro and of many older ones as well is of very questionable value.

Just how conditions may be improved would be exceedingly difficult to say. But there is one avenue through which much improvement may be promised. The Negro is dependent largely for his advancement upon the example and encouragement of the whites. And one of the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of his religious development is what he feels to be the constant insincerity of the whites. It will do the average Negro very little good to learn that the white man has given a thousand dollars to convert the natives

in Africa while at the same time he is growing rich by exploiting his own colored employes. Strict justice and fairness on the part of the white church member will make it easier for the colored man to live up to his religious obligations.

Furthermore if vital Christianity is to prevail in the Negro's life he must have a larger part in shaping the policies under which he is to labor. After many inquiries I have found almost no instance where the colored ministers and leaders have been asked to take part in carrying out any program for civic betterment in their city or town. Usually the program is mapped out by the white leaders and after it has been put through the colored leaders are expected to bring their people up to the new requirement. On the other hand, some of the most hopeless conditions that I have seen prevail where the protests of the conscientious colored men have been constantly made against the presence of cheap dives in their community only to be ignored by the white political machine. It is hardly fair for a city government to permit wholesale temptations to be placed in the path of the Negro and then blame him if he falls. And I doubt whether there is anywhere a more pathetic instance of a losing struggle than is afforded by the futile efforts of a Negro mother to rear her children under the conditions prevailing in many Negro sections of our cities.

It is useless to criticise the Negro for the failure of his religion while the whites are making it impossible for it to be otherwise.